DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 396 010 UD 030 950

AUTHOR Schwartz, Wendy
TITLE A Guide to Computer Learning in Your Child's School. For Parents/about Parents.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE [95]
CONTRACT RR93002016
NOTE 5p.; Based on "Computers and Opportunities for Literacy Development" and "Technology as a Tool for Urban Classrooms," two digests published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. For related documents, see UD 030 946-958.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Computer Centers; Computer Networks; Computer Science Education; Computer Software; *Computer Uses in Education; Cooperative Learning; *Educational Technology; Elementary Secondary Education; Integrated Activities; *Parent Role; *Partnerships in Education; Teacher Attitudes; *Teaching Methods; *Technological Advancement

ABSTRACT

Using a computer should be an important part of children's education. Some guidelines are provided to help parents evaluate the value of computer use in their children's school. School policies should provide for a well-equipped laboratory, a variety of appropriate software, and a way for students to network with other students. All students, regardless of gender, should use the computers, and teachers should be knowledgeable. In addition, students should be using technology to increase problem-solving skills and to learn important life skills through simulated computer software. Cooperative learning should be part of school computer use, and teachers and students should work together at the computer. It is also important that computers be used across the curriculum to address all, or at least several, academic subjects. Parents can encourage computer use by letting schools know that they consider it a priority. They can offer practical help in trying to obtain low-cost resources and looking for partnership programs to benefit the school. (SLD)

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ED 396 010

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A GUIDE TO COMPUTER LEARNING IN YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL

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The Value of Computer Learning

Using a computer in school should be a basic part of your children's education for three important reasons:

- computers can make learning all subjects easier, and they are especially valuable in developing children's language and problem-solving skills;
- children can get a huge amount of information and knowledge that they couldn't possibly get from textbooks and more traditional learning tools by using computers to reach hundreds of information sources (called "telecommunications networks"); and
- understanding computer technology (called "computer literacy") is necessary for most good paying and interesting careers.

All children should be taught how to use computers directly, but they can also learn how while they learn other subjects. Children can learn to read and write in English (and improve their native language ability) by using computers to communicate with their classmates. They can even create, write, and edit a newsletter or magazine. Also, by using computers to connect with other people and places, they can learn about other cultures and countries, or get in touch with students who share their native culture.

Using computers can teach children important life skills, like the value of working together and of staying with a project until it is completed, and the feeling of accomplishment when they solve a problem. By working with, and possibly tutoring, schoolmates of different ages and at different education levels, students learn to share information and skills.

Until recently, only schools with large budgets had good computer equipment, and they used computers primarily to

teach science and mathematics. Also, in the past, computers were used with boys more often than girls, and only with high-achieving students. Now, though, new less expensive equipment (called "hardware") and education programs that run on computers (called "software packages") make it possible for urban schools to have computers for students, and to use them for all subjects.

Below are some guidelines for helping you evaluate the value of computer use in your children's school.

School Policies

- Does the school have these resources:
  - well-equipped computer laboratories,
  - a variety of computer packages for students at different education levels and with different learning styles,
  - a way to communicate ("network") with students in other places and to reach information sources by computer, and
  - adequate technical support staff?
- Do all students, regardless of academic achievement level and knowledge of the English language, learn computer technology and use computers for learning other subjects?
- Are female students encouraged to use computers and shown how useful computers are to their current lives and future career goals?
- Are teachers knowledgeable about computers and given the chance to learn new ways to teach using computers?

Technology Learning

- Are students taught to use computers to solve problems, not just as a substitute for pencil-and-paper exercises and other ways to memorize information (called "drill and practice")?
- Do computer courses use situations and problems from real life to show students their practical uses?
- Are technology classes organized to allow groups of students at different learning levels to work together (called "cooperative learning techniques") to develop technology skills?
- Do teachers and students work together with computers, or do computers just take the place of teachers?

Computer Use Across the Curriculum

- Are computers used to teach all, or, at least, several academic subjects?
- Do students use reference materials available on computers (such as dictionaries and encyclopedias) when preparing reports?
- Are students shown how to use computers to get information on the subjects they are learning?
- Do students write reports and other assignments on computers, and are they allowed to correct their own papers and each other's on the computer, to learn how to think about what they are saying and be sure they are saying what they mean?

How to Encourage Computer Use in Schools

Unfortunately, many schools—particularly those in poorer, urban neighborhoods—don't have good computer equipment or enough teachers trained in computer technology to make the best use of the equipment that is available. There are, however, ways that parents can help improve computer programs, both individually and through

their school or neighborhood parent association. Here are a few suggestions:

- Let your school know that you consider computer use a priority for funding and program development, and computer education for teachers an important staff development activity.
- Research ways to get free or low-cost computer equipment for your school, and make it a project of your local parents' group to contact these sources. Local libraries are likely to have this kind of information, if your school and school district do not. Sources include:
  - Computer manufacturers and creators of education programs.
  - Other corporations that can donate computer equipment they no longer use.
  - Telecommunications companies (such as AT&T) with programs to help schools become part of worldwide computer networks.
  - Foundations that provide money for computers in school.
- Find out what computer resources are available in local public and college libraries, if individual students can use them, and if the libraries are willing to offer computer classes for student groups and their teachers.
- Ask the computer departments at nearby colleges (community and four-year, public and private) if they are willing to form a partnership with your school, or if they willing to provide students and teachers with computer instruction either on campus or at the school site. These types of programs benefit both college and public school participants.

While these efforts are not likely to result in a computer for each student's personal use, even the arrival of a few computers with just some basic education programs for use in a central location can benefit students. Any successful effort can serve as a good first step that will make future attempts to bring computer technology into your school easier.

This guide, written by Wendy Schwartz, is based on **Computers and Opportunities for Literacy Development** *and* **Technology as a Tool for Urban Classrooms**, *two digests published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. Please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the Clearinghouse for a copy of these digests and a list of other Clearinghouse publications.*

This publication was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002016. The opinions in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

Other guides to help parents help their children learn can be found on the National Parent Information Network (NPIN) on the Internet. You can reach the NPIN World Wide Web at http://ericps.ed.uiuc, or the NPIN Gopher at gopher://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu. Ask someone in your local library, your children's school, or your parent center how to see the information on this network.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Box 40
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY 10027
800/601-4868
Fax: 212/678-4012
Internet: eric-cue@columbia.edu